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LET'S SPIT ON HEGEL

ALL, PHILOFICTION DELEUZE, DIALECTICS, HEGEL, MARXISM

Hegel is an asshole"-Karl Marx
"Hegel is an asshole"-Carla Lonzi
"Hegel is an asshole"-Gilles Deleuze
"Hegel is an asshole"-Rei Terada
Credit where credit is due for today's writing prompt: Carla Lonzi's 1970 treatise "Let's Spit on Hegel," originally published by the group Female Revolt [Rivolta Femminile] and published as a book in 1974, with an English translation in Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp's Italian Feminist Thought (1991) as well as a more recent version circulating online. How did Lonzi understand Hegel? And why did she want us to spit on him?
"Sputiamo su Hegel", wrote Lonzi and her comrades in the manifesto of the women's revolt,

which was painted on the walls of Rome and Milan in the summer of 1970: Let's spit on Hegel! "Hegel's dialectic does not deal with the liberation of women, this large population group that is so oppressed in patriarchal civilization," wrote the feminist collective. Hegel's famous master-slave dialectic was merely the "settling of accounts between groups of men".

Lonzi took up the Sputiamo line from the manifesto and wrote the longer text "Let's Spit on Hegel" in the summer of 1970. Lonzi's dissection of Hegel is precise and deadly. I would like to reproduce the opening salvo, here in Veronica Newman's translation:

"Consider the relationship between man and woman in Hegel, the philosopher who saw the slave as the driving moment of history. He rationalized patriarchal control most subtly within the dialectic of a divine feminine principle and a human masculine principle. The former reigned in the family, the latter in the community. While the community maintains itself only by destroying the happiness of the family and dissolving self-consciousness in universal self-consciousness, it creates its inner enemy in that which it suppresses and which is at the same time essential to it – in other words, in femininity in general" [Hegel, Phenomenology, § 475]. The woman never goes beyond the stage of subjectivity. She recognizes herself in her blood and marriage relations and thus remains directly universal. She lacks the necessary conditions to leave the family ethos and achieve the self-conscious power of universality through which man becomes a citizen. Their condition, which is the consequence of their oppression, is treated by Hegel as its cause. The difference between the sexes forms the natural metaphysical basis for both their opposition and their union. In the feminine principle, Hegel locates an a priori passivity in which the evidence of male domination disappears. Patriarchal authority has kept women in subjection, and the only value accorded to them is the ability to accept it as their own nature. In line with the entire tradition of Western thought, Hegel sees women as inherently trapped in a certain stage to which as much resonance as possible is given, but in which no man would ever choose to be born."

Hegelians will defend his depiction of a "hostile" woman, this lady of "perpetual irony", as a kind of illusory femininity, an image of woman that must be overcome at all costs. Nevertheless, the logic of the "one particular stage" remains particularly pernicious in Hegel, and as we shall see, it also underpins his bleak views of Africa and other parts of "world civilization" outside the cosy confines of Europe.

The fact of women's structural dependence particularly irked Lonzi, both within leftist movements and in general. "Women have always been economically dependent," she wrote, "first on their fathers, then on their husbands."

"Our message to man, to genius, to the rational visionary is: the future of the world does not lie in constantly moving forward on a path marked out by man's desire to overcome difficulties. The future of the world is open: it lies in starting the journey all over again, with the woman as the subject.

Carla Lonzi

Not only Hegel, but also Marx was the target of her criticism. She had little faith in the class struggle and the workers' movement. "We question socialism and the dictatorship of the proletariat," reads the manifesto of the women's revolt, as these social structures themselves had so often excluded the question of women. "Marxism ignored women," says Lonzi. "Its revolutionary theory was developed within a patriarchal culture."

Indeed, Lonzi spares neither Marx nor Lenin, denouncing them for their implicit patriarchy and their undermining of women's movements. (Lenin in a letter to the German Marxist Clara

Zetkin: "You seem preoccupied with questions of sex and marriage…I am told that sexual themes were also a favorite topic in your youth organization…This is particularly scandalous, particularly harmful.") This led Lonzi to a general skepticism towards political interventions in the name of "revolution" or even "equality". The "sufferings, needs and aspirations" of women should not be "subordinated to the class problem". Rooting women's liberation in Hegel's master-slave dialectic "is a historical mistake", she wrote. "It presents the problem through the terms of men."

An autonomous feminist movement is necessary. It must emerge from within itself, with the women's revolt as a step towards restoring a new society of women. "We communicate only with women," was the final sentence of the manifesto of the women's revolt, comunichiamo solo con donne. And for more on Lonzi, I recommend the lengthy and thoughtful essay, We Are All Clitoridian Women: Notes on Carla Lonzi's Legacy, in which the Claire Fontaine group reflects on Lonzi in a larger framework beyond the Hegel essay, including her relationship to art and many other things. I'm reminded here of how artist Lee Lozano would reverse the strategy of "only communicating with women" a year later in her infamous "boycott" piece. "I boycott women," she wrote, and by the end, Lozano was confident that "communication will be better than ever."

Kamran Behrouz, "Becoming-forest" (2018)

But in 2020, fifty years after Lonzano's exhortation, Hegel has never had it so good. Today, we are in the midst of a Hegel renaissance. Of course, left-wing Hegelians like Fredric Jameson have long been part of the discourse. And there is a small but enduring community of American philosophers working on Hegel, such as Robert Pippin and Robert Brandom. But I'm thinking more of philosophers in the continental tradition like Catherine Malabou and Judith Butler, who both return to Hegel frequently and have even co-authored a book on the subject. Or remember Susan Buck-Morss and her 2005 book on Hegel and Haiti, the gist of which has already appeared in the form of an article. Or Reza Negarestani, who surprised the world – or at least me – with a recently published volume of Hegel fanfic. And then there's Slavoj Žižek, arguably the most influential contemporary Hegelian in the world, whose outsized notoriety – with no small assistance from the likes of Alenka Zupančič, Mladen Dolar, Joan Copjec, Todd McGowan and others – has helped to solidify the currently fashionable Lacan-Hegel stance in psychoanalysis, replacing the older Freud-Marx configuration, which was undoubtedly a political step backwards, if not an intellectual one.

Despite all that, I'm here to tell you that Hegel is an asshole. But how exactly? And why? Aside from Lonzi's intervention, I document two other major problems, followed by two others of a more subtle nature. First, Hegel is an asshole because he is a racist, an insurmountable obstacle for many readers. Second, Hegel is an asshole because he is an idealist, also an insurmountable obstacle for many, though less blatant. Third, Hegel is an asshole because he is a hysteric, a controversial epithet that I will explain in a second. And finally, Hegel is an asshole because he's a quietist, another label that needs to be unpacked.

Rei Terada's recent essay "Hegel's Racism for Radicals" is an excellent introduction to the story, not only because she so clearly outlines "the desperate anti-blackness of Hegel's account of sub-Saharan Africa" (13), but also because she so adamantly argues for rejecting Hegel in and around the virtues of the progressive left. Thus, Terada points to Hegel's advocacy of a "radical openness to history," not an absence of openness, or to Hegel's rejection of "nature and essence," not a pernicious essentialism. "In these philosophical

choices," Terada writes without equivocation, 'I find Hegel's specific contribution to racial capitalism' (12).

Hegel's complaint was not so much that African or Indian peoples were inferior in an absolute sense – although he thought that too – but that they were closer to matter and therefore less suited to the kind of spiritual self-alienation to which Hegel's dialectic commits. In other words, they will not transcend themselves, or not as quickly or as well. They simply won't leave their condition behind, he thought, and even if they leave it, they will always return to the same place. (Remember what Lacan said about the Real in his famous Seminar 11: The Real always returns to the same place). What Terada describes as "Hegel's rejection of 'natural' orders" (14), a seemingly admirable stance, actually further disenfranchises those who are labeled too natural to denaturalize themselves. Hegel's white European emerges not so much as the one who has the capacity to exert violence, to buy or sell, to rape or dismember – although that too is possible – but something like the opposite, namely to be violent himself, to dismember himself, "a capacity to be dismembered and therefore shaped by the absolute…. The same ecstasy is received by the torn and dismembered historical [European] subject; its dismemberment is narrated and retold as a graphic dazzle" (15, 20). In this way, Hegel "transforms the 'openness' of the negative into the measure of authentic development and then uses it to produce racist images of Africans who 'lack' it" (16).

Marx was, of course, a Hegelian at a very low level, but here we can recall how and why Marx was so torn on the question of alienation. For the young Marx in particular, alienation was a kind of terror, ontologically, physically and psychologically. Yet Marx kept the logic of alienation close throughout his life because he knew it was so essential to the workings of modern capitalism and, he believed, to history in general.

Even Hegel's alleged rejection of slavery provides further fuel for the subordination of Africans. Terada explains this virtuoso reversal as follows:

"Hegel complains that Africans see 'nothing indecent' in being related to Europeans only through slavery. There is no slavery in the state, which is reasonable; slavery exists only where the spirit has not yet reached that point. In the truest sense of the word, for Hegel, this lack of connection and its ill effect, blackness, is the reason why Africans must remain enslaved for a while longer" (17).

Note also the work of Denise Ferreira da Silva, who has written about how dialectics itself, especially in Hegel, but also in Marx, can never contribute to the explanation of blackness. Concepts such as negation, opposition or contradiction do not work for them because they assume that "the distinction is between opposing representations of the same form" (11n24, emphasis added). Blackness is something else for them. "Blackness shatters the glass walls of universality" (2).

The Hegelians are rightly crestfallen here, because according to them, this is exactly how dialectics works, namely through strong negation. However, I interpret Ferreira da Silva as making a distinction between the dialectical tradition and that of, say, structuralism – I am not saying that she herself would subscribe to this label – the former with its ravenous appetite for absorbing all forms of alterity and integrating them into the universal, the latter steadfastly holding to a point of structural exclusion necessary for the maintenance of the whole edifice. To get beyond the dialectic, one need only turn to Fanon, Robinson, Spillers, Hartman or Moten, for they all reject the dialectic, according to Ferreira da Silva:

"Although Frantz Fanon's rejection of dialectics is best known, I also find this rejection in

Cedric Robinson, who traces the black radical tradition; in Hortense Spillers, who conceives of the flesh as a zero degree of meaning; in Saidiya Hartman, who refuses to rehearse racial violence as a moment of black subjectivation; and in Fred Moten, who describes blackness in the scene of violence and rejects an easy reconciliation with the categories and premises of modern thought" (9-10).

To be sure, the master-slave dialectic is often held up as a kind of ideal for recognizing and overcoming difference. The bona fide Hegelian will say: here, too, there is mutual recognition. Whether master or slave, one recognizes the other. Both are weakened in this relationship, and both will be dissolved. As we have seen, Lonzi was skeptical of the logic of recognition and identification: "Identification has a compulsively masculine quality," she claimed, "it deprives existence of its flowering and subjects it to the demands of a controlling rationality" (17). And I think Ferreira da Silva would say something similar: identification is the compulsive tick of whiteness; the "Hegelian subject that recognizes" is part of the logic of racialization. On the Africa question, Hegel's defenders often exonerate their consciences by pointing out – and here Terada hints at their disapproval in a casual remark – that Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of history were just that, lectures… lectures mind you! …subsequently collected material that was not originally intended for publication, as if a new kind of morality, this bibliographical one with phenomenology at its head and history at its tail, could exculpate Hegel from that other, more distasteful morality (European head, African tail). The phenomenon of "left Hegel" versus "right Hegel" does similar ideological work. Terada wryly notes that this distinction between left and right provides a convenient cover for anyone wishing to disavow Hegel's more unsavory side. As she puts it, "left Hegelians often assume that anti-Hegelians oppose right Hegel and that it is therefore their own task to explain the resources Hegel still offers to the left" (12). You have a problem with something Hegel said? Oh, that's just the bad side talking.

I suppose the same indiscretion is committed by those Marxists, of which I am certainly one, who incessantly try to erase the "bad Hegel" from the pages of Capital, hoping to remedy the errors of the idealist through the corrections of the materialist. Just as Althusser warned: Don't read Part 1 of Capital! There's too much Hegel in it… Too bad, it's one of the best parts. But I make no apologies for wanting to get rid of it. I'll say comparatively little about Hegel's idealism, though, because ranting about the political inadequacies of idealism is old hat for the left. Althusser's tense relationship with Hegel's idealism was on the side of capital, but at the same time it was a proxy war against Stalinism and Maoism. The desire to "read" Marx in a new way and to turn to other sources from the history of philosophy therefore took on an immediate political urgency. In those years, Althusser's student Pierre Macherey brought the debate to a head with his clearly titled work Hegel or Spinoza. (Despite the title, Macherey's book is a symptomatic reading of both figures, not a death struggle). Yet it was ultimately Gilles Deleuze who emerged as the most formidable anti-Hegelian of his time, writing so frequently under the auspices of Spinoza himself and inverting Hegel's idealism into a robust materialism, as Marx had done a century earlier. Spitting on Hegel, Deleuze once admitted that he "detests Hegelianism and dialectics most of all" (Negotiations, 6). Hegel's toxic cocktail of negation and identity was too repulsive for Deleuze, who instead constructed his own anti-Hegelianism around affirmation and difference. (People scold me when I say that there is no negation in Deleuze; they cite this or that passage as evidence to the contrary, but the bottom line is that one must fully affirm affirmation to understand Deleuze).

Let's spit on Hegel the racist. Let's spit on Hegel the idealist. Since these are relatively uncontroversial, two more indictments follow: Hegel the Hysteric and Hegel the Political Quietist. Even an incorrigible Hegelian like Žižek might agree, at least in part. As Žižek said in a recent lecture, Hegel's Phenomenology and Logic are hysteria in its purest form. In these texts, Hegel displays a permanent self-questioning – I say this, why do I say this, do I really say that, and so on and so forth. (In contrast, Hegel's Encyclopedia and the text on law are what Lacan would call a "university" discourse, textbooks that enumerate the various known points and sub-points of an existing system of knowledge. According to Žižek, then, we have two Hegels: the hysterical and the liberal).

The concept of hysteria is, of course, associated with pseudoscience and misogyny. But psychoanalysis also provides a technical description: the hysteric is the one who stubbornly denies the unity of the master by "irrationally" negating this unity, by overwhelming it with excess, by enjoying instead of obeying, by slipping from the symbolic into the real. The hysteric thus has a very special relationship to the notion of wholeness, unity or the "One", a relationship that is simultaneously not one, but is also sewn into the One as a proxy. As Lacan himself describes in his Seminar 16: "What the hysteric does is to subtract the object a from the absolute 1 of the Other in order to determine whether it actually provides this 1, which would function as a kind of insurance." The hysteric experiences all this as pleasure. Far from being disciplined or excluded by the One, and certainly not silenced or suppressed, the hysteric in a sense takes the place of the One and so overflows with excess pleasure, but only by first creating the conditions of wanting that the One so necessarily requires. Here we see another facet of Hegel's hysteria: the only true subject is the willing subject, and likewise the relentless logic of willing retroactively generates and propels what we call the "subject". Let us remember that for Terada the problem was not that Hegel had no theory of "self-splitting, aporia, disarticulation and negativity", but that he advanced these logics so relentlessly! Hysteria does not threaten the wholeness of the Hegelian subject. Rather, the Hegelian subject, defined as incomplete, is hysteria.

Lacan claimed that not all hysterics were women, but for him the "not all" was an essential part of the "woman" side of the formulas of sexualization discussed at length in Seminar 19. "[W]oman is pas toute, not all," Lacan states (89). "[S]he harbors a jouissance other than the phallic jouissance. … If woman is not everything, it is because of the duality of her jouissance" (88). I will carefully sidestep the dangers of this signifier "woman" by merely noting that there is considerable debate in Lacanian circles about whether the labels "woman" and "man" are even necessary for Lacan's formulas of sexuation. I tend to side with people like Joan Copjec on this point: Sexual difference doesn't so much stipulate that "there are two sexes", which seems at odds with transsexuality and biological plasticity (not to mention gender performativity, which Copjec famously rejects), but it does say that "the symbolic fails in two ways", call them things other than woman/man if you like, call them the "mathematical" failure and the "dynamic" failure, as Copjec does.

But if you spit on Hegel, don't you also spit on women? I hope not! Metaphysics picks its winners and losers – that's the point, after all – and when you spit on the system, you shouldn't point to a particular structural condition, the "hysteria" that prevails in that system. On the contrary, spitting on Hegel should offer a great new landscape for women's liberation, as we have seen by starting with Lonzi, even if she does not have to be the end.

The problem with Hegel's hysteria is not that it is feminized, but that it is conservative. Hegel's

hysteria is a form of pathological stagnation, regression in the guise of development. "Deepening the contradiction" ultimately means being content with one's shitty lot. Let us recall the infamous finale of Freud's studies on hysteria, in which he transforms the "hysterical misery" of his patients into what Freud calls "general unhappiness". Ordinary unhappiness! Imagine if that were the best you could muster. In fact, such common unhappiness seems to be the order of the day. Or year… If not the century that has passed since then.

In other words, Hegel raises the contradiction, and for that he deserves praise, but the "necessity of contradiction" defeats the contradiction in the end, broken under the blade of necessity. This leads to a particularly pernicious form of political quietism, for what use is it in a universe full of contradictions to pursue one particular contradiction over another? Such a monotony of viewpoint leads to the entrenchment of the one who looks. "The most serious drawback of the Hegelian system," Jameson concedes in a moment of candor, 'is the way in which it conceives of speculative thought as the 'consummation of itself' (namely, of reason)" (Hegel Variations, 130-131). Even the master-slave dialectic, cited by some as the core of phenomenology and the main target of Lonzi's spit, falls back on something like the reason-reason dialectic, which is not a dialectic at all. Hegel is a kind of endless mirror, a hyper-mirror. The Hegelian subject looks outwards, but only speculates with itself. Or as Lonzi puts it in her Sputiamo: "The cunning of reason will always coincide with power."

What Hegelianism ultimately denies most of all – and in other ways also invalidates Freud and Lacan – is the event that is so often derided as "political modernity", namely the heroic overcoming of the real conditions of existence. So here's a bland slogan, if you want one: Show me a Hegelian and I'll show you someone too nervous to become a Marxist. Ha! But, alas, there's still time! Rest assured that you can get everything you think you need from Hegel from Marx, just in an improved form. And why stop there when we also have Lonzi, Terada, Deleuze, Fanon and so many others.

Meanwhile, Hegel is still with us and the world is still a soulless hellscape. But fortunately the streets are full of political modernists today. Just find a burning police car and you will feel the embers.